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MEXICO:

Wal-Mart's Plans for Indigenous Areas Under Fire

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MEXICO CITY, Aug 25 (IPS) - The U.S.-based retail giant Wal-Mart, which last year opened a store near the ancient Teotihuacan pyramids of Mexico despite loud protests from local activists and small businesses, is now seeking a repeat of its earlier victory, this time in two heavily indigenous areas. But local opponents are set for a pitched battle.

This time we will definitely keep Wal-Mart from continuing its attack on Mexico's culture and its people," said Lorenzo Trujillo, head of the Civic Front for the Defence of Teotihuacan Valley, a coalition made up of local residents and shopkeepers from the internationally renowned archaeological zone.

Trujillo is facing legal action for the protests his organisation held against the construction of a Wal-Mart store less than two kilometres from the Teotihuacan pyramids.

Wal-Mart, which is now the biggest retailer in Mexico, has 710 stores and fast-food restaurants in this country of 104 million, with total revenues of more than 13 billion dollars a year.

Trujillo said he has already begun to coordinate protests and other actions with organisations of local farmers and shop-keepers in Pátzcuaro in the state of Michoacán, home to the Purépechas Indians, to keep Wal-Mart from building one of its superstores in the town.

The picturesque colonial town of Pátzcuaro has a population of 48,000, 5,000 of whom speak indigenous languages. It is located on the banks of a lake in the state of Michoacán, east of the Mexican capital. The area is famous for its typical indigenous celebrations and crafts.

Trujillo reported that his group would also help organise the resistance in the town of Juchitán, in the southern state of Oaxaca, where Wal-Mart also plans to build a new store.

Juchitán is a largely indigenous town of 3,500 where prehispanic practices like bartering still survive in the open-air markets.

"We are not going to let Wal-Mart barge in with its neoliberal trade practices to sites of historical and cultural importance in Mexico. We cannot continue allowing this plunder," said Trujillo.

As during the earlier construction of the hypermarket near the pyramids - which carries the name "Bodega Aurrera", a Mexican chain that belongs to Wal-Mart - representatives of the retail giant did not respond to IPS inquiries about the plans for new stores and the resistance put up by local civil society groups.

When Wal-Mart built its supermarket in Teotihuacan, with the authorisation of the National Institute of Archaeology and History (INAH) and several other government agencies in Mexico, Trujillo's organisation held a number of protests, including the occupation of INAH offices in the Mexican capital. It is in connection with that action that Trujillo is facing charges of ransacking and use of force.

Although those opposed to the "Bodega Aurrera" store in Teotihuacan received the support of a number of academics and historians, the superstore opened its doors in late 2004.

By contrast with other Wal-Mart stores, the hypermarket in Teotihuacan is ochre-coloured and has no loud colours or signs. It is located near the ancient citadel, within the limits of San Juan Teotihuacan, a town that has grown steadily over the past 20 years to its current population of more than 45,000.

The buildings and roads built in the area where the original city of Teotihuacan was located only left the 263-hectare ceremonial centre and part of a 200-hectare "buffer zone" surrounding it intact.

A number of small local businesses in San Juan Teotihuacan have closed in the last few months, unable to compete with Wal-Mart.

The store is barely visible from the citadel of Teotihuacan, which was built by indigenous people at the dawn of the Christian era and reached its peak of splendour between the years 450 and 600 AD, when it was home to as many as 200,000 people.

Teotihuacan is the name given the spot by the Aztecs, who discovered the abandoned buildings around the year 1300. The Aztecs were so impressed by what they found, they thought the pyramids had been built by giants with the help of the gods, historians report.

The main ceremonial complex, which is visited by more than two million people a year, is made up of the pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, and numerous temples and houses along the Avenue of the Dead, which is five km long and between 50 and 100 metres wide.

The Pyramid of the Sun is as high as a 20-story building and 215 metres square. It is the third largest pyramid in the world and the largest at Teotihuacan.

Activists predict that only the ceremonial centre of Tollan Teotihuacan, an indigenous name that means "Where Men Become Gods", will be left in 20 years.

According to Trujillo, "if logic and reason win out, someday in the not-too-distant future" the Wal-Mart supermarket near the pyramids will be shut down and demolished. "Time will prove us right," he argued.

The activist said the transnational corporation would continue facing resistance to its plans for building new stores in Pátzcuaro and Juchitán. But local business sources said Wal-Mart was going ahead with its expansion plans and had not run into any major hurdles. (END/2005)